

Code Compliance

— guidelines on Seattle regulations governing safety and quality of life

City Regulations for Maintaining Vacant Buildings

November 1996

The City of Seattle's Housing and Building Maintenance Code (HBMC) includes provisions which require owners of vacant buildings to maintain them in the interest of public safety and preservation of housing and neighborhoods.

Because a number of the explicit standards in the code, such as those requiring utility service and safety features like door peepholes, are essential only for occupied buildings, the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) has determined by administrative rule that only certain standards will be enforced for vacant structures.

While it is perfectly legal for a building to be vacant, the City does not allow owners to leave a building open to unauthorized entry. Similarly, owners are required to provide maintenance adequate to protect authorized entrants, such as firefighters, and to prevent building decay.

Who is responsible for vacant building safety and maintenance?

A building's owner is responsible for maintaining it in accordance with city codes and regulations, regardless of provisions of any agreement with any tenant, manager or operator.

What standards apply equally to vacant and occupied premises?

Standards which apply to all buildings, vacant and occupied, are those which require the removal of hazardous substances, infestation, litter, garbage and overgrown vegetation from the property. Outdoor

storage of inoperable vehicles, materials and appliances is not allowed.

How must a vacant building be secured against unauthorized entry?

A vacant building may be secured simply by locking doors and windows. However, if the window glass is not intact or doors and locks are not secure, building owners must install plywood coverings, firmly nailed in place, or other equivalent protection.

Detailed standards for securing the building are found in the HBMC. In areas where experience indicates that buildings are subject to entry by unauthorized persons, owners are advised to install plywood over all openings within ten feet of grade and to utilize more durable materials than in the minimum standards. One operable door must be maintained into the building.

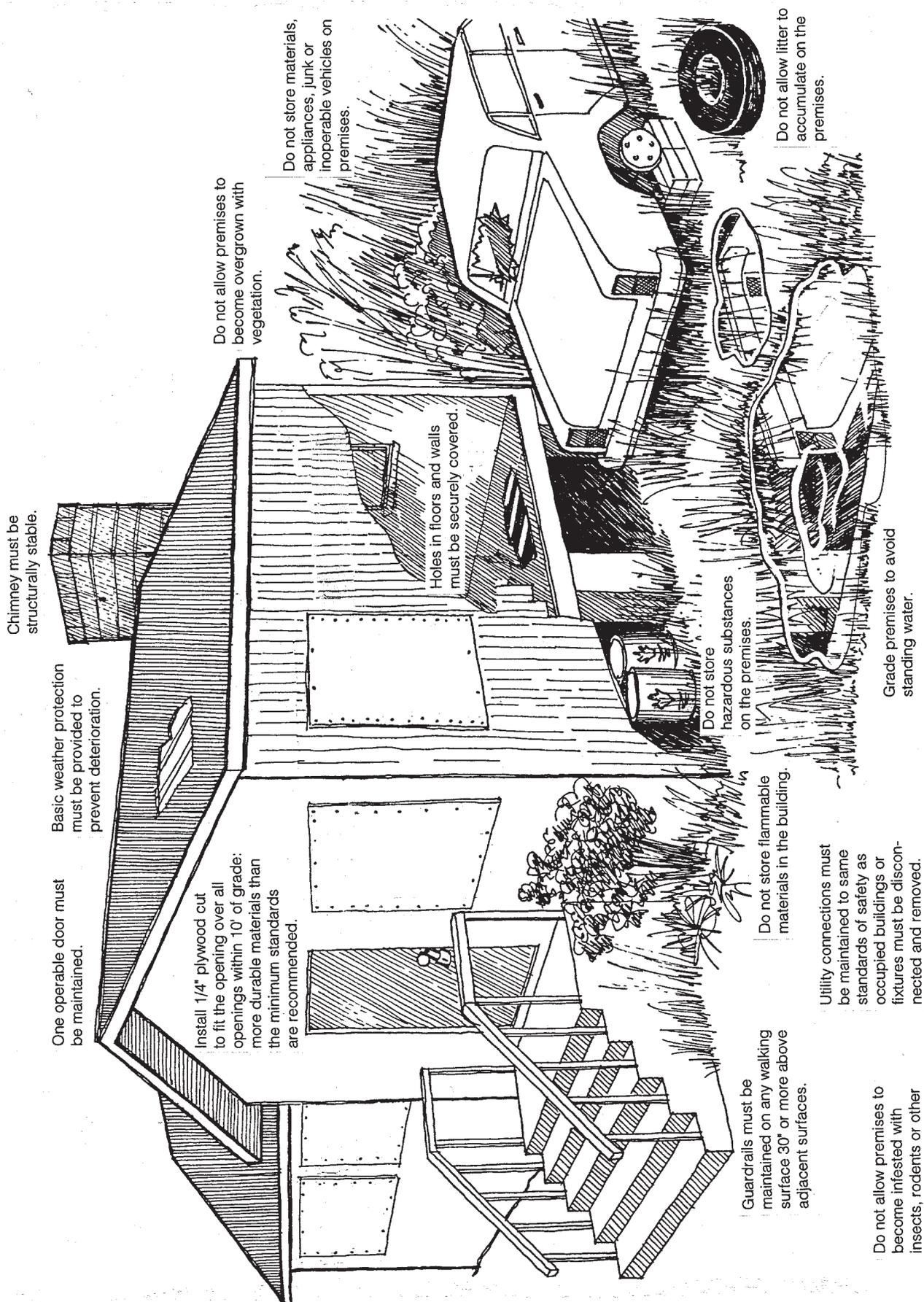
What standards relate to utility service?

Utility connections in vacant buildings must **either** be maintained to the same standards of safety and operability as those in occupied buildings **or** fixtures and connections must be removed and utility service terminated.

How about fire safety regulations?

Fire safety prohibits the storage of flammable materials in vacant buildings. Access to the building and safety for firefighters entering the building are important. Thus, holes in floors and walls should be securely covered, and one operable door must be available. Details on materials and dimensions of floor and wall coverings, guardrail heights and design, and operable door standards are provided in the Seattle Building Code. The Seattle Fire Code also includes additional standards for vacant buildings. No litter, debris or combustible materials may be stored in the building.





LEGAL DISCLAIMER: This Client Assistance Memo (CAM) should not be used as a substitute for codes and regulations. The applicant is responsible for compliance with all code and rule requirements, whether or not described in this CAM.

Do any standards apply to the exterior of vacant buildings?

Basic weather protection must be provided to prevent deterioration, and the premises must be graded and drained to eliminate standing water. Premises must be free of litter or junk storage, including inoperable vehicles.

Are there rules about reoccupying a vacant building?

After DPD has issued a Notice of Violation or an Emergency Order which results in a building being vacated, the building cannot be reoccupied by a renter until an inspection is completed, all violations are corrected, and a Certificate of Compliance is issued to the owner. The only exception to this standard is that an owner may reoccupy a single family detached dwelling without correcting the violations cited if no rooms are rented or leased to others.

What can I do about a vacant building open to unauthorized entry in my neighborhood?

Complaints about vacant buildings which do not comply with the standards explained in this memo and further detailed in the HBMC should be addressed to DPD's Inspection Services Division, (206) 684-7899. The department will conduct an inspection and can require an owner to close the building. If a violation is cited, DPD will inspect quarterly to make sure the building remains closed and will bill the owner for inspection services.

Access to Information

Links to electronic versions of DPD **Client Assistance Memos (CAMs)**, **Director's Rules**, and the **Seattle Municipal Code** are available on the "Publications" and "Codes" pages of our website at www.seattle.gov/dpd. Paper copies of these documents, as well as additional regulations mentioned in this CAM, are available from our Public Resource Center, located on the 20th floor of Seattle Municipal Tower at 700 Fifth Ave. in downtown Seattle, (206) 684-8467.